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## FOGAZZARO'S LAST ROMANCE—"LEILA"

BY RUTH EGERTON

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ANTONIO FOGAZZARO'S last work, "Leila," the long-expected, much-talked-of-in-advance romance, has only recently been published in Milan. It is—or purposes to be—a "romance"; and it is a very long work of nearly five hundred pages, which has obviously been very carefully written without any haste and in a calm and reflective spirit.

We have presented to us as the heroine and hero in chief (for there are several *sub* heroines and heroes in this piece) Lelia and Massimo. "Lelia," not Leila, is the heroine's real name, in spite of the title-page of the novel, a somewhat puzzling distinction and one which is not explained to the reader until about page twenty-nine. She is a young and rather good-looking girl, adopted by a wealthy old man, Marcello Trento, and his delicate wife chiefly because they had both been opposed to her betrothal to their adored only son Andrea, who died before the marriage took place. They, as it were, make an act of atonement to his memory by adopting his betrothed as their daughter, thereby also rescuing Lelia from the sordid and repulsive surroundings of her real home in Padua, where her immoral and most undesirable father lives, separated from his wife and ruled over by a housekeeper of more than shady character. Her mother, who has likewise had "a past," is described as having become pious, living in Milan, occasionally writing to her daughter religious-sick letters.

The hero, Massimo Alberti, is the much-loved friend of the above-named Andrea Trento, to whom Andrea had poured forth all his lover's dreams and fancies, but who yet never during Andrea's lifetime saw Andrea's betrothed in the flesh, although certain photographs shown to him of her produced very remarkable impressions on his mind. He is by way of studying medicine and lives with an eccentric

and well-to-do old uncle in Milan, but he is more actively employed in propaganda, holding conferences and giving lectures on the critical religious questions of the day (all of which are curtly described by his shrewd and matter-of-fact old relative as "*Bellissim rob che concluden nient*").\* Massimo has, whilst a student in Rome, fallen under the influence of the famous Pietro Maironi (Fogazzaro's old love "*Il Santo*") and become his devoted disciple and admirer; and here we come to the pivot on which the whole so-called *romanzo* turns—Massimo is, at any rate for a considerable part of the book, such an exaggerated species of echo of the *Santo* that we feel convinced that Fogazzaro conceived him and undoubtedly wrote this last book to revive the memory of "*Il Santo*," and to indirectly vindicate his own religious theories which have been severely treated by the authorities whilst reiterating (not only by Massimo, but also by the mouth of one of the priest characters in the book) his constant protestations of loyalty to the Catholic faith.

To all students of Fogazzaro's novels, this more or less veiled representation of the author's own opinions, this identification of himself with one of the chief characters in his work, is the current which, underlying his romances, has aroused that real (and, to superficial readers, sometimes almost inexplicable) interest which his works undeniably do.

In "*Leila*" three types of priests are introduced, all good, all seemingly life-like and all enunciating religious views from their different standpoints: Don Aurelio (another admirer of the *Santo* and friend and master of Massimo), who is the humble-minded, self-denying parish priest, fairly well educated, a close and liberal follower of the Gospel teachings, who receives into his house the sick old *colporteur* convicted of selling Protestant Bibles and whom nobody would consequently take in, regardless of what might be imputed to him for so doing by his superiors and his neighbors; Don Tito, the archpriest of Velo d'Astico (the mountainous district in which the scene of the romance is chiefly laid), with his good-humored, rough, unpolished ways, red-faced and not overclean, sharp and decisive, but not, as a rule, hard-hearted, of lowish birth himself and over-appreciative of rank in another, attached to traditional ways of doing things; Don Emanuele, his chaplain, the nephew of

\* Milanese dialect: "Very fine things which come to nothing."

a cardinal, of good birth, narrow-minded and full of unconscious spiritual pride, ascetic, making a fetish of tradition—all three absolutely *sans reproche* as to their mode of living and all three of them good priests—Fogazzaro handled these characters with ease—one feels he had met them and known them in real life. When, however, he came to the *romanzo*, to his hero and heroine, to his would-be impassioned love scenes and melodramatic suicidal attempts, then, as in some of his other novels, his hitherto light touch becomes heavy, his effects labored, and *alla fine* we have offered to us for our admiration an impossible unlovable couple, of exaggerated self-conscious, neurasthenic and tediously introspective tendencies, from whom we turn away, often bored and sometimes even slightly disgusted.

With all their almost Oriental love of minutiae, so much more fully developed, as a rule, than with English people, the Italians surely cannot—we hope they cannot—acknowledge Lelia and Massimo as a typical Italian young woman and young man? Pages and pages are devoted to Lelia's spasms and "*sussulti*" and wonderings whether she likes or ever will like Massimo Alberti or not; and equally long and tiresome are Massimo's doubts on the same subject and his letters to his friend Donna Fedele Vaila di Brea (a subheroine of the book), to whom he confides the conduct of his very lengthy love-affair with Lelia. This "Donna Fedele" is a most important character, and indeed so much of the book is taken up with her and her goings-on that it might quite as appropriately have been entitled, instead of "Leila," "Donna Fedele." Donna Fedele, a lady of about fifty-six and who in extreme youth fell passionately in love with Andrea's father, Marcello Trento, appears to us, as drawn by Fogazzaro (whether intentionally or not is somewhat difficult to decide), a perfect type of a saintly busy-body. She is, in spite of her extremely bad health, literally everywhere. She interviews the priests inimical to Don Aurelio her particular friend, she visits the sick poor, including the old renegade *colporteur* whose proceedings get Don Aurelio into serious trouble, she teaches the young peasant girl French, she volunteers to tackle Lelia on the subject of her desired marriage with Massimo—"desired," that is to say, by Lelia's adopted father, who sees in the marriage the only solution of the problem of whom to leave his property securely to and away from Lelia's own ob-

noxious belongings. She has her really pious finger in every pie and she is withal profoundly and deplorably tactless! The poor lady finally atones for her continuously foolish treatment of Lelia, and for her lack of judgment in showing Massimo's letters to her (thereby driving that excitable young lady to commit an extremely rash and foolish act) by dying herself, her death being caused by her neglecting to have an urgently necessary operation performed and travelling instead to rescue Lelia from the awkward position in which the latter has got herself into by going to find Massimo alone in an out-of-the-way mountain village! We do not quite know whether the author means us to admire and love Donna Fedele—but we are afraid we do neither one nor the other. She is, in spite of her goodness, a tiresome female and would not have made Marcello Trento a happy man had her affection for him been requited in the days of their youth.

The chapter entitled "*Forbici*," which concerns Lelia and her sentiments, goes with a certain amount of swing, and we can raise a good deal of sympathy for her when we read first her dialogue with Massimo and then with the (also) all-pervading *Cameriera* Teresina; there is a great deal too much, though, throughout of spying and talking and interviewing of each other's lady's-maids; and one bit of almost unparalleled bathos must not be passed over—so redolent is it of the "prunes and prisms" of Italian growth. Lelia is very slowly and carefully preparing herself to commit suicide by drowning herself in a mountain torrent, and she has written a good-by letter in which she informs Donna Fedele that she is going to die "*non so perche*." . . . "She does not know why [*sic*], but still less does she know why she should live," and so forth. Then, changing her mind, she tears it all up and puts a photograph of Andrea instead upon the writing-table with the words written beneath it, "*4 Luglio . . . Vengo. . .*" She washes an ink stain off her finger, passes several minutes in deciding whether she shall take or leave behind a little chain purse given her by Andrea—and then full, as she presumably must be, of this awful resolution to take her own life for no reason whatever, what does she next do? . . . She deliberately goes and cuts off a piece of the curtain cord to take with her, for the purpose of "tying round her petticoats" before the final plunge into the torrent, to thereby prevent their "*becoming*

*disarranged* and so *scoprire le gambe!*'' “ *O mi pover'om!*'' as Donna Fedele's worthy old cousin Eufemia might justly here exclaim. It seems almost incredible that, side by side with the great literary powers he possessed, such incapability of seeing the ludicrous should exist; but the (to us) ponderous quality of Fogazzaro's humor is not only to be found in the above instance—many more might be quoted in which, for example, Donna Fedele's so-called “ *solito umorismo fine* ” (“ customary fine sense of humor ”) crushes us with its lifeless weight, as when Cousin Eufemia's old shawl is repeatedly made the object of her witticisms; or, again, when (with rather doubtful taste and an unintentional profanity) the author dwells on and repeats as evidently being rather a good thing that the archpriest Tito, his chaplain, and his sister-in-law are nicknamed or referred to by the names of the Trinity, and so forth. However, humor is a tricky steed to mount, and it is just possible that what appear to us to be elephantine gambols may strike others in the light of fairy caperings.

With all these drawbacks to our perfect enjoyment of his *romanzo* there is, as one goes on reading it, a curious sensation as of seeing the author's portraits and characters being slowly engraved and cut out before one's eyes; and if, as so many Italians assert, his portraits are faithful we must accept them as being of a school of art foreign to us, but none the less true portraits and high art. In a certain sense (though we consider him on the whole his inferior) Antonio Fogazzaro reminds us of Anthony Trollope. The two Anthonys both spare no time or trouble in the turning out of their characters—and both produce the literary equivalent of some finely, minutely painted picture of “ *A Dutch Interior* ” by Gerard Dow—each stroke finished, nothing passed over, nothing omitted. Both, too, write, as it were, of things already left, or being left, behind. Their best books are those which deal with a past rather than a present generation, and signs of labored effort and a straining to keep abreast of the most modern times becomes apparent at once when they cease to write of those things which they have passed the greater portion of their lives in living among and seeing around them. To read the “ *Piccolo Mondo Antico* ” and then “ *Barchester Towers* ” is to arrive at the conclusion that Antony Fogazzaro is Italy's Trollope and Anthony Trollope is the Fogazzaro of England. Another feature

accentuating this resemblance is the so frequent choice of their subject. Both write of the religious life in their respective countries, but (a great "But") Fogazzaro was a Catholic and Trollope was not, and—Protestants rush in where Catholics fear to tread. The outspoken, almost immoderate, criticism of all persons and things in the ecclesiastical world of Barchester must necessarily be lacking in the Catholic novel, though indeed Fogazzaro runs his fellow author often very close in this respect; yet there is always a feeling that even after he has caused one of his characters to enunciate some rather terrific anti-clerical sentiment he has done so rather with an eye for the effect than of set purpose; that his rather snail-like propensities will lead him to draw in his horns when touched, and that Massimo's most fervid utterances of an un-orthodoxical character will be safeguarded on the next page by some qualifying remark from Don Aurelio! From a moral standpoint, though, this habit of Fogazzaro is most unsatisfactory of scattering broadcast through his books the tares with the wheat in the form of tentative remarks and questions put into the mouths of young men distinctly wobbly as to their own beliefs—*e. g.*, when Massimo, in one of his introspective epistles to Donna Fedele, writes thus after a detailed account of how he has lost his faith—or rather *one* of his faiths! "Peter" (he writes) "doubted Christ and Christ stretched forth a pitying hand to him. Will He not stretch it forth to him who doubts Peter if Peter himself will not stretch forth his?" (*vide* p. 318). This letter of Massimo reeks—there is no other word for it—of the now somewhat stale Modernist young-man flavor, and it is difficult to see the reason for publishing these anti-clerical platitudes but for the one above assigned, for in a few chapters further on the author makes Massimo again change his changeable mind and announce to Don Aurelio that he has "returned to Christ and the Church!" As far as the romantic side of the book goes, it is not very likely to become generally popular with the reading public outside the immediate circle of Fogazzaro's own school of admirers: and it is to be hoped that the chronicles of Massimo's grasshopper-like leaps from one form of belief, or doubt, to another will not do much harm to any Catholic who has an ounce of real religious conviction in him. The religious question, always to the fore in Italy in some form or another, occupies the greater portion of

“*Leila*,” and in that field of writing Fogazzaro was considered by his compatriots to be a past master. Had he entirely confined himself to that subject and left out Lelia and love incidents altogether he would, in our opinion, have produced a far better book, and by sticking to the track of dialectical discussion instead of losing his way in the paths of love he would have rendered fuller justice to himself and to his peculiar style of writing in this, his last romance. Taking it altogether, we do not think “*Leila*” will add much to the author’s renown—its chief ingredients, love and religion, are not well mixed. We confess to not caring at all, so far, about Fogazzaro’s young women nor much for his young men, and the perfect Italian religious novel, one which will not weary the reader by any of its contents, is (peace to “*Il Santo’s*” shade!) still to be written. Fogazzaro was certainly the only Italian author who might have written it had not death stilled his hand and his doubts.

RUTH EGERTON.